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Structure and Symbolism in the *Estoire
d'Atile en prose*

Roberto Pesce
(University of Oklahoma)



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Structure and Symbolism in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*

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ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses and analyzes the narrative structure of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* and its possible meanings and symbolisms, expanding on the *Introduction* to the edition of the text. I suggest that the text connects the origin of Venice to the biblical story: as Abraham's wife, Sarah, fulfilled God's promise and gave birth to Israel, both as the Promised Land and the Chosen People, Queen Sarah of Padua is the mother of the city of Venice and, metaphorically, of the Venetians, projecting the origin of the city to a higher and allegorical level.

KEYWORDS:

Estoire d'Atile en prose – Attila the Hun – Venice – Origin – Franco-Italian

Most likely composed in the second half of the 13th century and preserved in two anonymous and untitled manuscripts located in Zagreb ZM MR 92 (hereafter *Z*) and in Venice BNM lat. X 96 (3530) (hereafter *V*), the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* is an original work in Franco-Italian that recounts the story of Attila the Hun in the Italian peninsula, merging historiographical accounts with local aristocratic folklore, themes of chivalric romance, and epic battles¹. The text represents the war between Christians and Pagans, a common motif in Old French and Franco-Italian literature, through the leading figures of the two sides,

¹ *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 1-23. The critical edition of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* that considers the text of both *Z* and *V*, using *Z* as a base manuscript, was published in 2021 by Pesce and Whalen; a previous edition that relied solely on *V* was published by Bertolini in 1976. A description of *Z* is in Bertolini 1980: 5; Spetia 1993a: 152-171; Spetia 1993b: 242-246; and Beretta 2017: 138-139. A description of *V* is in *Estoire d'Atile en Ytaire*: 9-10 and Beretta 2017: 139-142. On the text and its meaning, see the *Introduction* to the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*, Collodo Ozoeze 1973, Carile 1973, Beretta 2017, Marin 2017: 285-293 and 443-470. Despite the efforts of other scholars who give a more specific timeline for the composition of the text, we prefer to keep a broader chronology. In fact, we are not fully convinced that the hand that composed the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* in *Z* is the same of other parts of the miscellaneous codex (Spetia 1993a: 162-168 and Spetia 1993b: 243-244), nor that Rolandino's reference to Attila and Gilius (Zenusius de Ruthena) in his *Cronica* depends directly on the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* (Beretta 2017: 148-150), nor on the recent proposed dating of the problematic tradition of the *Chronicon Altinate* to the 13th century (Marin 2013: 100-103, and Beretta 2017: 150-151), since the three different codices of the *Chronicon*, though having additions that date to the 13th century, show signs of reworking and the traditional dating is, as I write, still valid (11th-13th centuries).

King Gilius of Padua and Attila the Hun. Alongside this trope, the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* narrates the story of the foundation of the city of Venice, the *Venetia maritima*, through the heroine Queen Sarah of Padua, Gilius' wife, who leads the populations of the mainland to the islands of the Venetian lagoon to escape the fury of the invaders. This essay will discuss and analyze the narrative structure of the text and its possible symbolism expanding on the *Introduction* to the edition of the text².

The *Estoire d'Atile en prose* can be divided into three main sections: Chapters 1-5 combine different traditions and sources, from the death of Jesus Christ to the spread of Christianity over paganism; Chapters 6-20 cover the birth, life, and death of Attila the Hun, focusing on the barbarian invasion of the *Venetia* region and the foundation of the city of Venice; Chapters 21-23 end the story with the aftermath of Attila's death and the defeat of the pagan army. The text does not always offer a coherent narration: names, dates, and cities are at times unclear or confused, with chronological leaps and dubious digressions that hint at either an oral tradition, or the use of multiple sources, or a combination of both³. The story took written form in a text presumably closed to that of *Z*, on which the critical edition is based, and was later re-elaborated, as witnessed in *V*, for encomiastic purposes regarding the city of Padua⁴.

1. *The Narrative Structure of the Estoire d'Atile en prose*

1.1. *Chapters 1-5: A Complex Preamble*

The first part, the most inconsistent from a narrative perspective, seems to have been put together by juxtaposition of different elements that are somehow connected. The text opens in a linear timeline with the death of Jesus and the martyrdom of the Apostles who were spreading the Gospel throughout the world, concluding the first chapter with «[...] vos conterai de monsignor sainç Perre e des apostoiles de Rome» (*Estoire d'Atle en prose*: 1.28). With a sort of anadiplosis, Chapter 2 opens with similar words to connect the two units: «Or dit le contes qe monsignor sant Peres fu crucifies en Rome» (ivi: 2.1), followed by a list of popes from Peter to the 4th century. The *enumeratio* ends with pope Sylvester,

² In particular, *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 12-23.

³ Ivi: 7-9.

⁴ There are 23 chapters in *Z*, while *V* divides the text into 38 chapters (see *Estoire d'Atile en Ytaire* and Beretta 2017: 144-145). Beretta proposes a valid *stemma codicum* that presumes the existence of a lost codex β , on which depends *V* and later translations into Latin and Venetian vernacular (see also *Hystoria Atile*, xiii-xxv). The manuscript tradition depending on β , in fact, contains a series of Paduan interpolations that are not present in *Z* (Beretta 2017: 148). See also Bertolini 1980 and *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 19-23.

who received from Emperor Constantine the Great «la corone de son chief e ses draps reials e tote la enperials segnorie: son pales en Laterans et tot ce qe a son empire apartenoit» (ivi: 2.24-25, the *Donatio Constantini*). The tale then narrates in the same chapter the legend of Helen, Constantine's mother, and the finding of the Holy Cross, marking the diffusion of Christianity in Late Antiquity⁵. In a chronological leap, Chapter 3 takes the reader back to the 1st century CE by way of an Arthurian interpolation⁶. This chapter contains the legend of the Holy Grail and of Joseph of Arimathea, who was able to live in a sealed tower for 40 years. This part has no connection to the rest of the text; however, this digression foreshadows the literary trope of a person secluded in a tower, which will have an important role in Chapter 6, both literally and metaphorically marking the life of the main character of the text, Attila the Hun.

Chapter 4 seems to reconnect to the narration interrupted in the first chapter, opening with «Par tot li mondes o les apostres et li autres disciples alerent se crestienerent les genç en repost» (ivi: 4.1-2). More specifically, the text recounts the preaching of Mark the Evangelist in the 1st century in the city of Aquileia that continues in Chapter 5, with the spreading of Christianity in Northern Italy and, with an ellipsis, in Eastern Europe up to modern Hungary, where King Ostrubal of Hungary (Huns and Hungarians were often confused in the Middle Ages) and his people perceived this event as an attack against their power. According to the story that tries to validate and historicize the narration, this happened at the time of the Roman emperor Justinian (6th century), whose son 'Auradian' was supposed to marry Ostrubal's daughter. The fifth chapter marks the transition from a large picture of Christianity to the main focus of the story, Attila the Hun. It also introduces some onomastic confusion, making it difficult to identify historical characters or follow specific genealogies for the Roman names mentioned in the story. In fact, the name 'Auradian', on which both codices *V* and *Z* agree, is never mentioned again in the text, but it is possible that it could refer to the same emperor 'Eraclians' ('Etradians' in *V*) or his son introduced as 'Eraclius' ('Eradians' in *V*) in Chapter 16, and called 'Araclius' or 'Eraclius' ('Aradius' or 'Eradius' in *V*) in Chapters 22 and 23. A similar issue appears with the name of the Eastern Roman Emperor: 'Justiniens' in Chapter 5, which could be interpreted as emperor Justinian (527-565); 'Eraclians' in Chapter 16, possibly representing emperor Heraclius (610-641), who fought against the Avars and after whom was named the city of Heracliana, where the first Venetian Doge was elected; and finally

⁵ The Holy Cross later appears as the emblem of the Christian knights fighting the Huns: King Cordas of Concordia holds it in *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 9.48-49 and ivi: 10.23, King Gilius of Padua in ivi: 18.3-4, and the imperial army in ivi: 23.3-4.

⁶ See Whalen 2022: the interpolation of the Joseph of Arimathea story and Holy Grail, while not directly connected to this foundation myth, stands as one of the earliest examples of an Arthurian episode described in notable detail in a Franco-Italian text.

'Justinus' in Chapter 22, perhaps referring to either emperor Justin I (518-527) or Justin II (565-578), or the name could also be a scribal error for Justinian. The details on the forthcoming wedding between the son of the emperor and the daughter of the king of Hungary are never mentioned again; nevertheless, it could represent a narrative device to foreshadow the feud between Christians and Pagans and connect and justify the entry into the war of the Eastern Roman empire in the last three chapters of the story, which are not fully integrated in the narration.

This long and miscellaneous preamble, which consists of the combination of ecclesiastical material, hagiographical texts, Arthurian elements, and local historiography and folklore, ends with the Hungarians ready to attack the West because of the expansion of the Christian faith and leads to the central part of the story, the birth, life, and death of Attila the Hun and his war against Christianity in the Italian peninsula.

1.2. *Chapters 6-20: Attila the Hun and the Foundation of Venice*

The central part of the text narrates the life of Attila and his clash with the Christian lords of the Italian peninsula. After the introductory Chapter 6, which narrates Attila's feral birth that will be discussed later – he is the son of Ostrubal's daughter and a dog – the text can be divided into two focal points. The first narrative unity is in Chapters 7-8 that describe the fight between the Huns and King Menapus of Aquileia, a city that was the gateway between Western and Eastern empires in Late Antiquity. While the people of Aquileia move to Grado and elect a new Patriarch there – considered the first step in the creation of the Patriarchate of Venice in Venetian historiography – King Menapus fights against Attila and unhorses him, but at the end he is forced to flee to Grado as well because of the overwhelming forces of the enemy. After the conclusion of this first part, Menapus and the Patriarchate of Grado are briefly mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 9 only to disappear from the tale.

The second narrative nucleus is in Chapters 9-19, where Attila fights against King Gilius of Padua throughout the *Venetia* and in the Exarchate of Ravenna. Gilius is introduced at the beginning of Chapter 9, when Attila besieges Concordia (Chapters 9-11), as the paladin and leader of Christianity fighting the invaders. The war against Attila continues in Altino (Chapters 12-13) and Padua (Chapter 14). After the destruction of these cities, the Christians finally prepare their defense in Rimini (Chapters 14-15 and 17-19), where Gilius eventually beheads Attila the Hun during a game of chess and ends the invasion. While the barbarians destroy the cities of the mainland, their populations find permanent refuge on the islands of the Venetian lagoon led by Queen Sarah of Padua. As mentioned above, the colonization of these spaces is considered the foundation of the city of Venice⁷.

⁷ On the foundation of Venice see the essays in Cracco Ruggini (*et alii*) 1992 and Berto 2013.

Attila is the main character of the story as the anti-hero of the narration and agent of action. His personality is often referenced in the text, presenting a multi-faceted and dichotomous psyche that is perfectly summarized in the oxymoron «preudome a desmesure», which first describes him and prepares the reader for his paradoxical actions⁸. Attila wants to kill Gilius and be «sire de toç li monde»⁹ but, when the king of Padua is taken prisoner by the Huns during a single battle between the two leaders, he chivalrously «li done congié»¹⁰ and lets him return safely to Padua, despite having had an earlier prophetic dream that foreshadowed his own death¹¹. Then, after a second dream¹², he decides to rebel against his fate and tries to overturn divine justice planning to kill Gilius «par traïson»¹³, but his treacherous actions will lead instead to his demise, as we will see later. On the contrary, the hero Gilius is a knight widely celebrated for his many victorious battles against Attila. Nevertheless, despite having ample margins for action, he remains a substantially flat character with a secondary role compared to Attila: once Gilius kills him, the king's narrative function within the text is over and he dies a month after the Hun.

While this central section is the most coherent, describing the clash between Christians and Pagans with tropological and continuous battles between the two armies and exploits of Christians knights, there are digressions that were probably necessary to connect the different parts of the story and that hint, once again, at the use of different sources in the writing process. A first digression appears in Chapter 16 that narrates the vicissitudes of Duke Capitels of Adria, introduced for the first time in the last line of the previous chapter with a formulaic expression that denotes a break in the narration: «Mes tant lesse li contes a parler d'aus toç et parole de Capitels li dux d'Aire» (*Estoire d'Atile en prose* 15.7-8). After the fall of his city, the betrayal of Ravenna that surrendered to Attila in vassalage, and the death of his brother in Comacchio (these events are simply listed), Capitels flees to Constantinople to ask for the help of the Eastern Roman emperor, who immediately calls forth his banners, advances to Pannonia and the Danube River, and eventually engages in battle with the Pagans (Chapters 21-23). Capitels is mentioned twice in the following chapter (17.5 and 40) and then disappears from the text. The chapter creates a hiatus in the narration that is approaching its climax, but it is an essential narrative device to connect the divergent parts of the

⁸ *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 7.1 and Pesce 2017: 284-285; see also Varvaro 1998: 29, who identifies similar expressions as both negative and positive: the positive qualities of the enemies are affected by their being infidels («sarebbe un cavaliere X (dove X è sempre un valore positivo), se purtroppo non avesse la qualità Y»). The word 'desmesure' is associated with Attila also in *Estoire d'Atile en prose* 7.6 and *ivi*: 37, 14.119.

⁹ *Ivi*: 14.144.

¹⁰ *Ivi*: 14.74-75.

¹¹ *Ivi*: 9.52-69.

¹² *Ivi*: 14.136-139.

¹³ *Ivi*: 14.142.

story: it reminds us of the possible existing feud between Hungary and Constantinople mentioned in Chapter 5, where the Roman emperor is first mentioned, and above all it links the story to the last three chapters, otherwise not perfectly amalgamated with the rest of the narration.

A second digression appears at the end of Chapter 19. This chapter culminates in Attila's death; nevertheless, after this event, the text opens a parenthesis on the powerful Candiano family, the election of the first Doge in Heracliana, the monastery of San Zaccaria, and the Church of the Angelo Raffaele in Venice. This narrative deviation can be justified by the possible encomiastic origin of the text, since the Candiano family is the only extant Venetian house mentioned in the story:

Li bon rois Candian de Peue si ensi de lui – li Candiens – que se herbergere avec sa mere en Venise [...] Mes après en firent li Candiens, que illec estoient herbergieç, et Johans Candiens, que lors estoit evesque de Venisse, une mult belle eglise et grant, non pas de fust mes de piere cuité, et de lors en avant n'en vint plus l'abaesse de Saint Çacrie a la chapele de l'Angel Raphés¹⁴.

This legendary King Candiano of Padua, son of Gilius and Sarah, is not mentioned in any document. It appears to be the forefather of the Candiano family, even though Bertolini considered «li Candiens» as a marginal note merged in the body of the text in his edition of *V* and expunged it¹⁵. The mention of a King Candiano and, later on, of a John Candiano, Bishop of Venice, whose historical existence is questionable since there is no record of a bishop with such a name in ecclesiastical documents, may offer some possible clues about the celebratory nature behind the composition of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*¹⁶. In the 10th century, Ugo Vitale Candiano was named Count of Padua and Vicenza, and the title was kept within the Candiano family until the 13th century, when the Franco-Italian text was likely put into writing. At the same time, in Venice,

¹⁴ Ivi: 19.100-129. In this passage, the syntax is not fluid and the parenthetical 'li Candiens' is considered as an apposition of 'lui'. Other readings, though stretched, could be possible: the period is preceded by the statement: «En tel mainere, con ge vos di, fu ocis Atile, li flegeles des Cristiens, por la main du roi Gilius». Following a different but more problematic syntax, the subsequent period could refer to Gilius himself: «[...] roi Gilius, li bon rois Candian de Peue; si ensi de lui li Candiens [...]». In this reading, 'li bon rois Candian' is an apposition to Gilius himself, even though the family name is never mentioned earlier in the text.

¹⁵ *Estoire d'Atile en Ytaire*: 90: «Da espungere perché qui non pertinente, indipendentemente dal fatto che il significato non è chiaro».

¹⁶ King Candiano may be identified with Magnus Candianus (Candiano the Great), inhabitant of Rivoalto, who had a similar role as the progenitor of the Candiano family in the *Chronicon Altinate* (*Origo*: 133). According to the *Chronicon*, Magnus Candianus' son, Giovanni Candiano, became bishop of Torcello and founded the Church of the Angelo San Raffaele in Venice, similar to the account narrated in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*. See also Castagnetti 1993: 11-54, Pozza 1981: 15-32, and Pesce 2017: 280-282.

according to unfounded local traditions, the Candiano family turned into the Sanudo, whose origin is uncertain but were considered among the 'apostolic' families, that began to raise into prominent political positions in the 13th century, time of composition of the text¹⁷.

While both codices were composed in or near Padua, *V* shows unmistakable signs of spurious variants, all celebrating that city, which do not occur in *Z*¹⁸. These additions demonstrate the desire of the scribe or the person who commissioned *β*, on which depends *V*, to call attention to the local Saint Justina of Padua and her father Vitalianus, a legendary Paduan figure. The manuscripts differ in several onomastic details, such as the description of Gilius' lineage: in *V*, King Gilius is a descendant of Saint Justina's father, King Vitalianus of Padua (*V*, f. 22r: «doi linaje Vitalians»), continuing the celebration of local folklore; *Z*, instead, ignores municipal genealogies and links Gilius to «Maximien li rois» (*Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 9.23). This King Maximian opens the door to a problematic question regarding the Paduan origin and story of King Gilius. Even if the reliability of historical lineages is questionable in the text, as we have seen with Roman emperors, this «Maximien» could be identified as Emperor Maximian (286-305 CE), whose daughter Fausta married Emperor Constantine the Great (306-37)¹⁹. This lineage not only connects the figure of Gilius to another champion of Christianity, Constantine, but also legitimizes the intervention of the Byzantine emperor at the end of the story. *Z*'s reading, however, presents a major issue: in 303, Maximian began, along with Diocletian, the so-called Great Persecution, the «most systematic persecution against the Christians»²⁰ that ended two years later and that, according to hagiographical tradition, also caused the death of Saint Justina of Padua herself, martyred on October 7, 304²¹. While the manuscript tradition and the content of the story are strictly related to the Veneto region, the text of *Z* shows that the narration originally may have been independent from Paduan folklore and could have depended on another and older tradition, then re-elaborated as we see in *V*, which removes a questionable name with a familiar figure²². Otherwise, it is hard to

¹⁷ See, for example, Zabarella 1669: 52: «Pietro 3. Candiano Doge [...] li fù posto il nome, ò cognome glorioso di Sanuto, la causa fù secondo alcuni, che era sano tutto cioè di sanità & prudenza totalmente dotato; l'altra perche era Canuto, & per la sodetta sua virtù era detto non Canuto, ma Sanuto doueua esser detto». This tradition became popular and widely accepted, even though unfounded: «I Sanudo, anticamente denominati Candiani, furono dei primi fondatori di Venezia, discendono da Tommaso Candiano Sanudo, Senatore Padovano, che fuggendo le stragi di Attila, cercò nel 421 un asilo nelle Lagune Venete» (Schroder 1830: 248).

¹⁸ See Bertolini 1980, Beretta 2017: 146-148, and *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 19-23.

¹⁹ See Frakes 2012: 93-96.

²⁰ Lenski 2012: 67.

²¹ On Saint Justina of Padua, her martyrdom, and the role of Maximian see Prevedello 1999 and Bellinati 2006.

²² Beretta 2017: 148-152 connects Gilius to Zenusius de Ruthena, mentioned in Rolandino's

justify *Z*'s genealogy for King Gilius, unless we arbitrarily presume the existence of another and local Maximian not documented or identified by scholarship.

The shortest chapter of the text, Chapter 20, concludes this central part with a reference to the monastery of San Zaccaria in Venice and, similar to Chapter 5, it serves as a transitional moment connecting this narrative nucleus to the last three chapters.

1.3. *Chapters 21-23: The Pagan Defeat*

The last three chapters offer a different scenario: Chapter 21 briefly covers the aftermath of Attila's death and introduces his successor, Panduecus, who leads the retreat of the pagan army to Hungary. Three Christian characters of the central part (Prince Acarins of Este, Count Alfaris of Vicenza, and Moroels of Feltre) are mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 21, probably to give some form of cohesion to the narration (*Estoire d'Atile en prose* 21.12-25): with their knights, they sabotage the enemy withdrawal before fleeing to Cadore, a geographical area never mentioned before and far from the main action of the story²³. Once the barbarian army reaches the «pont que desor les eives estoient fait» (ivi: 21.28-29), probably over the Danube River, the clash with the imperial army foreshadowed in Chapters 5 and 16 begins. Other than Heraclius, the son of the emperor of Constantinople and leader of the Christian army, all the knights and commanders in this last section are never mentioned earlier, causing problems in the reading of some names²⁴. These final scenes describe once more continuous battles and the exploits of Christian knights, repeating the model established in Chapters 17-18 and ending with the surrender of the Pagans, Panduecus' retreat to Hungary with few survivors, and his death by one of his men, Count Gorpisels. This last section is coherent in that it presents unity of action, but it seems to be not perfectly connected with the rest of the narration while concluding the tale on the Hun army.

2. *Symbols and Meanings of the Estoire d'Atile en prose*

2.1. *Attila's Feral Birth*

The main section of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* opens with Chapter 6 that narrates the birth of Attila the Hun. His mother, the daughter of King Ostrubal,

Cronica; to Ianus, first king of Italy according to Paul the Deacon's *Historia Romana*; to Egilius, mentioned in the *Chronicon Altiinate*, from which Beretta extrapolates the *terminus post quem* for the composition of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* (see above: fn 1).

²³ On the toponym, see *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 117, fn 39.

²⁴ It is the case of 'Alixandre' (ivi: 123, fn 40), whose role could be read either as the emperor's messenger or his nephew.

was promised as wife to the son of the Eastern Roman emperor and was locked up in a tower for flirting with other men. The episode, anticipated by the confinement of Joseph of Arimathea in another tower with no door nor possibility of escape, has an important function in the narrative, because it marks and characterizes Attila's life: his actions, in fact, show a lack of rationality that could be connected to his hybrid nature, half human and half dog, which lead to his most peculiar characteristic, the 'desmesure'. Before imprisoning his daughter, King Ostrubal gives her a hound to keep her company. Nevertheless, the loneliness and lust of the young princess causes her to lie with the dog in an act of bestiality:

Il avint une nuit qe la damoisele estoit tote nue en son lit et li levrier estoit dejoste li: la damoisele estoit eschaufee de la luxurie, si adreça son ventre envers li livriers. E le livriers senti la cholor de la damoiselle, si s'adreça vers li. Et por le peché dou monde il conuit la damoiselle charnement. Grant fu le pechiez et doloros li damage qe la damoisele fu enceinte d'enfant [...] Mes qant l'enfant nasqui, il estoit dimi a la semblance d'ome et demi a la semblance de cien²⁵.

The bestial birth of Attila probably depends on the wrong interpretation of Jordanes' words, who describes Attila in *Getica*: 35.182 as a man with «forma brevis, lato pectore, capite grandiore, minutis oculis, rarus barba, canis aspersus, semo nasu, teter colore». The expression 'canis aspersus' means 'with a splash of white hair', reading 'canis' as the ablative of the Latin adjective 'canus'. However, somebody could have read the word 'canis' as the singular genitive of 'canis' and interpret the expression 'canis aspersus' as 'with the semblance of a dog'. Other interpretations are possible: the feral birth could depend on a misunderstanding of the term 'khan', in Italian 'can', a noble Eastern title that became popular in the 13th century through the success of Marco Polo's *Devisement du Monde*²⁶, or to the representation of violence in the Middle Ages, as Dante's depiction of the guardians of the seventh circle of Hell: Minotaur, Centaurs, and Harpies²⁷.

There may be another reason for seeing Attila as the son of a hound that could depend on the use of the word 'dog' to identify, denigrate, and offend observers of other religions in the Italian peninsula throughout the Middle Ages. Such an offense concerns both Jews and Muslims and aims to establish the inferiority of their creed and of their being. The reference to Muslims as dogs has a long tradition that goes back to the 10th century, and it was still frequently used in the 14th century²⁸: for example, Petrarch uses the expression in *Triumphs* 2.144, when

²⁵ Ivi: 6.9-26. On this point, see also Peron 2011, Beretta 2017: 160-163, and Pesce 2020: 8-18.

²⁶ For a discussion on Attila's feral birth and other possibilities for the origin of this legend, see Pesce 2020: 12-16.

²⁷ See Pesce 2021: 83-85.

²⁸ Ivi: 14-15.

he affirms «che 'l sepolcro di Cristo è in man di cani». In the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*, Attila invokes the gods 'Apolin' and 'Trevigant', who recall the epic tradition and create a parallelism between the Huns and the Muslims²⁹, a common theme that identifies all the non-Christian populations as Muslims, associating them with the trinity Apolin/Trevigant/Mohammed. The *Estoire d'Atile en prose* aligns to this trope, repeating the model of *chanson de geste*: «Charlemagne is replaced [...] by Gilius, Marsile by Attila, and the Saracens by Attila's pagan army»³⁰. This comparison was first introduced by Isidore of Seville, who interpreted and read history from a religious perspective and compared by analogy the historical meaning of the Huns to that of the Muslims. Both were considered by the Spanish archbishop as a divine instrument to punish a sinful Christianity that had lost the right path:

Atque ita Hunni, qui tot cladibus antea diminuti fuerant, rursus mutuis sese gladiis conciderunt. In quibus illud mirum est, ut, dum omne praelium detrimentum habeat populorum, isti vice versa cadendo proficiant. Sed proinde est quia in disciplinam fidelium positi sunt, sicut populus est gentis Persarum. Virga enim furoris Dei sunt, et quoties indignatio ejus adversus fideles procedit, per eos flagellantur, ut, eorum afflictionibus emendati, a saeculi cupiditate et peccato semetipsos coerceant, et coelestis regni haereditatem possideant³¹.

The Muslims ('gentis Persarum') are considered the new Huns as the 'virga' by which God punishes people hardened by their desire for earthly possessions and vices.

The conflation of paganism and Islam in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* shows a spirit of crusade common in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, above all after the final loss of Jerusalem in 1244, the end of the Latin Empire of Constantinople in 1261, and the fall of Acre in 1291, last stronghold of the Crusader states. The city of Venice and the *Venetia* were particularly sensitive to this matter of geopolitics, given the fact that its wealth and fortune were largely based on commerce and trade with the Middle East: Marino Sanudo the Elder (ca 1270-1343), one of the most important Venetian writers of that time, wrote the *Conditiones Terrae Sanctae*, which he presented to Pope Clement V in 1309. Sanudo aspired to create a new alliance among Christian rulers and organize a new Crusade to reconquer the lost holy territories. He presented a rehashing of his work to Pope John XXII in 1321, titled *Opus Terrae Sanctae*, and a final review, titled *Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis*, was sent to the most influential European rulers, including King Robert of Anjou and Cardinal Bertrand du Pouget³².

²⁹ See, for example, *La Chanson de Roland*: 2696-2697, 2712, 3267-3268, 3490-3491.

³⁰ *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 7; a different opinion in Wunderli – Holtus 2005: 119.

³¹ *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*: 28-29.

³² On Marino Sanudo the Elder see the 1611 edition of the *Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis*

Sanudo's writings incapsulate a common desire of the inhabitants of Venice and the region that emerges also in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*, in which the war between Pagans and Christians was caused, in fact, by religious motivations:

Qant il oï conter qe la loy cristiene venoit pres de lui, il en fu mult corrociez. Il mut de Ongrie en la compagnie de .V^c. mil home a caval sanz la menue gent qe venoient après aus. Atille estoit apellez le syre d'aus, grant chevalier et cruex a desmesure. Il n'amoit de riens les Crestiens, il mist a destrucion de Ongrie jusqe a Aquillee³³.

The evangelization of Eastern Europe, anticipated by the conversion of Emperor Constantine in Chapter 2, is the reason behind the war between Attila and Christianity in the Italian peninsula, which parallels the Crusaders' expansion and the subsequent Muslim counterattack. In order to defeat the overwhelming forces, in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* Christians have to unite and fight together to overcome the threat, mirroring Sanudo's goal of creating a new coalition to retake the lost Crusader territories.

2.2. *Babelic Chaos vs. Abrahamitic Unity*

This central part therefore shows the conflict between Evil and Good, Infidels and Christians. In the Middle Ages, the Huns were considered descendants of the biblical king Nimrod and the symbol of Babelic chaos. Nimrod was the nefarious grandson of Ham, the cursed son of Noah, and the son of Cush, progenitor of the Arabic tribes and the people living in the lands around the Red Sea, both in the Arabian Peninsula and in Northeast Africa: Noah > Ham > Cush > Nimrod > Hunor and Mogor, ancestors of the Huns/Hungarians and the Magyars. This legendary genealogy, which initially appears in Simon of Kéza's *Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum* (ca 1282-1285), quickly spread in Western Europe. Its popularity is first witnessed in the Italian peninsula in the works of Paulinus of Venice (ca 1270-1344), the most important Venetian historiographer in the first quarter of the 14th century³⁴. In Venezia BNM lat. Z 399 (1610) (ca 1321-1323), containing the first draft of the *Compendium* and other works written by Paulinus himself and by a scribe under authorial supervision, Paulinus describes the genealogy of Noah. In the left margin of f. 2r, Paulinus adds the following information regarding the descendants of Nimrod, Hunor and Mogor:

Ex hiis Hunor sunt Hungari. Hii venando ad paludes Meotidas pervenerunt ibique morati sunt; VI anno, agentes predas, duas filias principis Alanorum rapientes uxores duxerunt.

published by Bongars, the studies of Cardini 1976 and Rossi 1999, and Lock's 2011 study and translation of the 1611 edition.

³³ *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 7.3-7.

³⁴ See Veszprémy 1995 on the dependence of Paulinus from Simon de Kéza. For a chronology and genesis of Paulinus' works, see also *Tractatus de ludo scachorum*: 25-48 (*Introduction*).

Cum vero crevissent, de Sitica Europa Prutenos expulerunt, que inter Pontum et Rifeos montes sita est, ubi duo magna flumina oriuntur, Etul et Togora; primum, ut Rifeos montes transit, Don apelatur et per planiciem Alanorum tribus ramis in rotundum mare fluit, secundum per desertas silvas intrat Yrcaniam, vergens in mare aquilonis. Et divisa est Sithia in partes CVIII, tot enim tribus exierant de filiis Hunor et Mogor cum Sithiam invaserunt³⁵.

Not only was Nimrod the ancestor of the Huns, but he was also considered the father of idolatry in the Middle Ages. Paulinus writes: «Hoc Nemrot dicitur docuisse suos adhorare ignem; per hoc probans esse deum, quod res nocte invisibiles faceret sua virtute visibiles»³⁶. Hunor and Mogor are probably related

³⁵ Similarly, when Paulinus writes about the origin of the Huns, he states: «Alii dicunt eos de Nemrot duxisse originem. Vidit ibi» (Venezia BNM lat. Z 399 (1610), f. 47vI, in the *linea* «Regis Hunorum vel Avares vel Hungari», «De iniciis Hunorum»), commenting the following passage: «Cum Philomer, unus rex Getraum vel Gotorum quasdam magnas mulieres inter suos reperisset et solitudines errare coegit, quas nonnulli, quos faunos vocant, in amplexum recipientes, hoc ferocissimum genus hominum genuerunt, quod prima die in nata prole deseivit. Nam maribus ferro genas secant, eciam ante quam lac suscipiant. Hinc imberbes senescunt et [et] sine venustate ephebi sunt». Here, Attila is considered as the son of either «Pemudruth» or «Asdrubal». The second draft of the *Compendium* (ca 1321-1328) contains similar details (Paris BnF lat. 4939, f. 13r, section D: «explicacio de regno Hunorum»; see also f. 79v). This genealogy does not appear in Paulinus' first historiographical work, the *Notabilium Ystoriarum Epytomata*, composed in the first decade of the 14th century (see Firenze BML Plut.21 sin.4, f. 129vb, «de ortu Hunorum et regibus» and Firenze BML Plut.21 sin.9, f. 62ra, «de ortu et regibus Hunorum»). Nevertheless, the information appears in Paulinus' *Satirica Ystoria*: in Città del Vaticano BAV Vat. lat. 1960, composed between 1330 and 1340 and containing several works written by a scribe under authorial supervision, Paulinus describes in a *forma brevis* of the *Compendium* the genealogy of Noah and Nimrod is designated as the father of «Hunor» and «Mogor», «ex hiis duobus regnum Hunorum exortum est» (ivi: f. 2r). This origin is resumed in *Satirica ystoria* 175.6 titled «de ortu Hunorum» (ivi: f. 269v), in which the Venetian historian registers different possibilities for the origin of the Huns, including the following: «Alii dicunt quia de Nemroth nati sunt Hunor et Mogor, ex quibus Huni qui et Hungari. Hii venando ad paludes Meotidas [...] Et divisa est Sithia in partes CVIII, tot enim tribus exierant de Hunor et Mogor». In the genealogical tables at the end of the Vatican codex that are connected to the treatise *De Diis Gentium et Fabulis Poetarum*, the descendants of Nimrod are, once again, «Hunor» and «Mogor», «ex his Huni» (ivi: f. 269v).

³⁶ Venezia BNM lat. Z 399 (1610), f. 2r; *paene ad litteram* in Paris BnF lat. 4939, f. 13r, section A. This information is also reported by Giovanni Boccaccio in his *De Genealogie Deorum*: 14.8, in which Boccaccio argues against Paulinus' ideas for the origin of idolatry: «Sunt et alii gloriam hanc Babiloniis largiri volentes. Quos inter Venetus, Puteolanus episcopus, hystoriarum investigator permaximus, erat asserere consuetus dicacitate prolixa, poesim Moyse longe antiquiorem, ut puta Nembroth temporibus ortam; dicebat enim eum primum ydolatrie inventorem, eo quod cum ignem mortalibus accommodum vidisset, ac ex motibus eius atque murmurationibus variis futura quedam cognosceret, eum deum fore firmabat, et ob id loco dei non solum coluit Caldeisque suasit, verum illi templa construxit, sacerdotes ordinavit, et preces etiam adinvenit. Quibus in preces ostendebat eum exquisito usum eloquio, quod possibile est, esto, unde sumpserit, non explicaret liquido». Paulinus also summarizes the *Estoire d'Atile en prose* 7-19 in the *Notabilium Ystoriarum Epytomata* 180.3: «Anno Marciani 3»,

to the biblical nations of Gog and Magog, whose populations were often painted as monstrous beings that would have allied with Satan in the *Apocalypsis Ioannis*: «Et cum consummati fuerint mille anni, solvetur Satanus de carcere suo et exhibit seducere gentes, quae sunt in quattuor angulis terrae, Gog et Magog; congregare eos in proelium, quorum numerus est sicut arena maris» (*Ap*: 20.7-8); and, according to *Prophetia Ezechielis*, «Et ascendes super populum meum Israel quasi nubes, ut operias terram. In novissimis diebus erit, et adducam te super terram meam, ut sciant gentes me, cum sanctificatus fuero in te in oculis eorum, o Gog» (*Ez*: 38.16). These words are very similar to those used by Isidore of Seville to describe the Huns and to compare their historical meaning to that of the Muslims as divine instruments to punish a sinful humanity.

Attila and Nimrod are then linked together in the medieval tradition: the first embodies tyranny and is punished by Dante among the violent against their neighbors (*Inferno*: 12.134), the second is the first tyrant in history according to Isidore: «Nembroth interpretatur tyrannus. Iste enim prior arripuit insuetam in populo tyrannidem, et ipse adgressus est adversus Deum impietatis aedificare turrem» (*Etym.*: 7.6.22)³⁷. The subversion of the natural order caused by the construction of the Tower of Babel to reach God resulted in the confusion of

Atyla Ytaliam agressus omnis pene eius civitates aut diruit aut incendit. Hic enim Osdrubalis Ungarie regis nepos ex filia in potencia crevit et probitate armorum. Et cum veniret Aquilegiam, illi reliquias sanctorum cum parvulis ac mulieribus et thesauris in loco Gradensi tutaverunt, et mortuis ex parte Atyla 8000, Aquilegiensis vero 2000. Tandem, non valentes resistere multitudini, Aquilegienses muros civitatis statuis munierunt et sic, non advertente Atila, fugerunt. Interim dum ille falconem dimitit, super unam ex statuis resedit. Advertens autem Atila dolum, indignans sic eos manus suas efigisse, civitatem destruxit. Demum contra Concordiam processit et hii similiter parvulos suos ad litus maris miserunt et locum vocaverunt Caprulas. Ibi amisit Atila 17000 hominum, Concordienses vero 300, et in navibus descenderunt Caprulas, non valentes resistere multitudini. Postea transit Altinum, quod prius vocabant Anthenoridem, quia ab Antenore primo edificatur; et hii similiter parvulos cum matribus et thesauris miserunt ad insulas maris et postea edificaverunt Civitatem Novam et Esul. Tandem nocte fugientes habitaverunt insulam quam Torselum vocaverunt, et fecerunt magnos burgos vocatos Aymam; et quidam nobilis Costançat nomine prope habitavit et loco nominem suum dedit; et quidam alius similiter habitavit in Burano; multi quoque alii probi viri habitaverunt in loco quem vocaverunt Mazorbum; et plures alii locum vocatum Muranum. Inde transivit Paduam. Rex vero civitatis Padue iam miserat reginam cum filiis et filabus suis ad mare, qui in insulam descenderunt que dorsum habebat valde durum et usque hodie sic nominatur illa pars Venecie. Ibique de lignis fecerunt oratorium ad honorem Sancti Raphaelis ubi regina continue orabat pro regis salute. Cetera vero multitudinis quedam habitaverunt in Jubanico; alii in locis qui postea <dicti sunt> Sancta Trinitas et Sanctus Hermacora; nonnulli in Mathamauco. Atila vero, prius victus, postea victor fuit Paduamque destruxit [...] Tunc Veneti, aucti varia nobilium multitudine ceperunt, primo habere duces in Civitate Nova que Heracleana appellabatur. Monasterium quoque Sancti Zacharie Venecie edificatum est pro nobilibus dominabus, ubi filia regis Padue 2^a abbatissa fuit» (Firenze BML Plut.21 sin.4, ff. 142v-143r; and Firenze BML Plut.21 sin.9, ff. 76v-77r).

³⁷ In Dante, even Satan is «sevus tyrannus» (Dante, *Epistole* 7.4), see Pesce 2021: 88.

languages (*Gn*: 11.7: «confundamus ibi linguam eorum, ut non intellegat unusquisque vocem proximi sui»), the same kind of confusion that plays a central role in the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*. While the importance of language and languages is emphasized several times in the text, from the spreading of Christianity that originated the war between the Huns and the lords of the Italian peninsula to the victory of the Christians over the Pagans, language plays a specific role in Attila's death. When he disguises himself as a pilgrim to enter the city of Rimini and stab Gilius with a poisoned dagger, Attila is stopped and interrogated many times and, to hide his identity, he decides to speak French to anyone asking him questions («Et sachieç que il parloit a celui point langue francoise atot cels que de nouvelles li enquerroit»³⁸). The stratagem of speaking French allows him to get very close to Gilius, who is playing chess with another nobleman. While looking for a weak spot to land a blow against Gilius, instead of continuing his ruse in French, Attila makes a fatal mistake by laughing and commenting on the game in his own language, thus revealing his identity:

Atile avoit une voïç mout consonant et li cuens Asmont traist avant son roi et li rois Gilius voloit retourner la roine ariere et lors parla Atile en lengage de Ongrie, que il cuidoit que nuls ne le deüst entendre, et dist, “Celui que a li alfiç ne le ti[n]engne pas vilç que scac roc poroit bien dire.” Quant li rois Gilius oï parler Atile, il entendi bien ce que il dist. Que, lors quant il estoit sire de Patavie, il avoit ses drugemans de maint langajes, si qe il avoit apris maintes paroles. Et lors traist la main a soi et regarda li geus et voit apertement que il disoit voir. Et gita li alfiç et dist, “Scac au roi et au roc”³⁹.

Attila began to watch the chess game attentively and, when Gilius made a faulty move, he laughed at the king of Padua. However, he must have had a very peculiar tone of voice, defined in *Z* as ‘consonant’ and in *V* as ‘conoscant’. The word has caused some reading issues, since the two scribes report different *lectiones*: it could refer to a harmonious timbre of voice that would continue the paradoxical representation of Attila, or to a resonant quality of his speech that caught Gilius' attention (Latin and Venetian vernacular translations, who followed a text close to *V*, accepted the latter meaning). We rendered the word in our translation as ‘guttural’, interpreting the word as the adjective ‘consonant’ (related to consonant), since in the Middle Ages the way of speaking of non-Christians was compared to the yelping of dogs⁴⁰, a sound that perfectly fits the «face chanine» (*ivi*: 19.74) of Attila. While Gilius was considering making another wrong move, Attila suggested a better move believing no one would understand

³⁸ *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 19.39-41.

³⁹ *Ivi*: 19.50-62.

⁴⁰ See, for example, a text from 10th-11th century like Adémar de Chabannes' *Chronicon*: 175, which describes the language of some Muslims captured near Limoges with these words: «Loquela eorum nequaquam erat Sarracenisca, sed more catulorum loquentes, glatire videbantur».

him. Nevertheless, Gilius understood very well what he said because, while he was living in Padua, he had many interpreters of different languages and learned many foreign words. Once he recognized his enemy, King Gilius beheaded him with a stroke of his sword. The faculty of speech concerns humans or humankind, as affirmed by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia*: 1.2.1 («Eorum que sunt omnium soli homini datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit»), but the bestial nature of Attila seems to violate this rule and somehow influences his phonation rendering his voice 'consonant'. The language, therefore, unmasks Attila's attempt to hide himself as a pilgrim in order to kill Gilius, since his lack of rationality does not allow him to control his own actions: at first the Hun laughs loudly, attracting the attention of bystanders, then he betrays himself through his words, expressing himself in a language that is immediately recognized as different. Attila's multilingualism follows that of his own army that speaks twenty-eight different languages (*Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 23.59) and resumes the Babelic division of his ancestor Nimrod. Language, perceived as an instrument and symbol of rationality, becomes in the Franco-Venetian text an emblem of the hybridism between human and animal nature that condemns Attila to death, who, although expressing himself with an intelligible language, has a specific timbre of voice that is immediately perceived as different⁴¹.

The excesses of Attila, who leads an army composed of populations who speak different languages, wants to be king of the world in an act of hubris, and to go against God's will when he tries to fool his fate, parallel the tale of Nimrod and the Tower of Babel. In the same way the Bible opposes the Abrahamic unity and the Babelic division, the Franco-Venetian text opposes the Huns' excess and the Christian virtue and solidarity. The Christian army, in fact, presents religious and linguistic uniformity, has the same unity of purpose, and follows in unison the guidance and leadership of Gilius and his wife Sarah.

2.3. *The Promised Land*

The Christian unity is perfectly represented by King Gilius of Padua, who is able to lead the Christian army throughout the war and finally kill his archenemy. Nevertheless, he dies a few weeks after Attila since he has accomplished his mission and his role in the story is over. In the text, the most immediate and clear

⁴¹ Even if Attila is silent in Dante's *Inferno*, the poet uses a peculiar language in canto 12, where Attila is punished, to create «*monstra ritmici*» (Mazzucchi 2013: 407) to describe the pilgrim's astonishment in front of hybrid creatures, such as in *If* 12.117 and 136, with no accent on the fourth and sixth syllable, *ivi*: 12.108, 123, 130, 133, and 137 with secondary accents on the ninth and tenth syllable, and the rhyme '-unge' (*ivi*: 12.131, 133 and 135), *hapax* in the *Comedy*. Similarly, in *If*: 31.67, Dante employs the only 'rima per l'occhio' of the *Comedy* to render Nimrod's incomprehensible words «Raphèl mà amècche zabì almi» (see Pesce 2021: 86).

reference to the biblical unity is the name of Gilius' wife, Queen Sarah, a devoted and loyal wife who prays for the safety of her husband and builds a chapel dedicated to the Archangel Raphael, patron of marital love. The name Sarah immediately recalls the biblical wife of Abraham, who defeated pagan idolatry in the Old Testament. Such a name must have amazed the medieval reader since it was not common in the area and does not appear in any prosopographic study of that time. Because of that, I believe that the peculiar name clearly hints at the stories narrated in the book of *Genesis*⁴².

Paulinus describes how Abraham was miraculously freed from Nimrod's idolatry in the *Compendium* and in the *Satirica Ystoria* (ca 1330-1340):

Quod Abraam ab ydolatria liber fuit. Ceteris itaque omnibus errantibus Abraam, cum arte esset astrologus, et ratione et ordine stellarum potuit conditorem eiusque providencia intellexit cuncta moderari. Unde et angelus per visum ei aprensus plenius eum de hiis que sentire cepit edocuit. Vel aliter secundum Hebrei, Caldei in ignem, per quem traiciebant filios suos proiecerant Abraam, et Aran, quia nolebant ignem adorare, et Aran autem suffocate, Abraam Dei auxilio liberatus est⁴³.

Nimrod's idolatry is Attila's paganism. Their chaos, violence, and excess are contrasted first by Abraham, and now by Gilius and Sarah. The Franco-Italian anthroponym is a clear reference to the barren wife of Abraham, who manages to have a son, Isaac, only thanks to divine intervention (*Gn*: 17.12-25). Matriarch and queen are united by the change of name after receiving God (*Gn*: 17.15: «Sarai uxorem tuam non vocabis nomen eius Sarai, sed Sara erit nomen eius»; *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 9.25-26: «Gilius et la dame Sare: ensint furent apelé qant il se crestienerent») and the secondary role they seem to have compared to their husbands, Abraham and Gilius; nevertheless, through them divine providence manifests itself. In the book of *Genesis*, Isaac is the fulfillment of the promise of descendants made by God to Abraham and the only legitimate progenitor of the Chosen People: «Sara uxor tua pariet tibi filium, vocabisque nomen eius Isaac; et constituam pactum meum illi in foedus sempiternum et semini eius post eum» (*Gn*: 17.19). The biblical Sarah is the chosen vessel of God's will: «Et benedicam ei; et ex illa quoque dabo tibi filium. Benedicturus sum eam, eritque in nationes; reges populorum orientur ex ea» (*Gn*: 17.16). She did not give birth merely to a single person, Isaac, but to a nation, Israel, becoming the instrument for the codification of the Alliance between God and the Chosen People⁴⁴. The Franco-

⁴² In *V*, the name of the queen is *Adriane*. We rejected this variant in our critical edition. A discussion on the name of the queen of Padua is in Pesce 2017: 282-284, and *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 22-23. Neither Stussi 1965, nor Folena 1971, nor Tomasin 2000, nor Berto 2014 found any record of this name.

⁴³ Città del Vaticano BAV Vat. lat. 1960, f. 50va (*Satirica Ystoria*: 11.2).

⁴⁴ The analogy is reinforced by the angel's blessing to Abraham, who compares the people of Israel

Italian Sarah has a similar function: after accepting the Christian faith, she becomes the emblematic mother of the city of Venice at its founding with God's help.

In the scene of the chess game that leads to Attila's demise, Gilius moves all the noble pieces on the board except one, the queen («li rois Gilius voloit retorner la roine ariere», *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 19.55-56), after Attila suggests a different move. The final victory comes through a different strategy: the queen, in fact, has a different role, which is not to move back to her previous position but to be left in her new house. Mirroring the game, Queen Sarah must not return to Padua but stay in Venice. While Gilius embodies the good Christian knight in his fight against the enemy, Sarah leads the transmigration from the *Venetia* to the *Venetia maritima*, an act that symbolizes the birth of Venice⁴⁵ as she leads the populations of the mainland to salvation by crossing the sea. This permanent act of migration repeats the Trojan migration and the foundation of the first *Venetia*, whose origin is often recalled throughout the text. Following the Virgilian model, the cities of Aquileia, Concordia, Altino, Oderzo, Asolo, and Adria were founded by Trojan fugitives who took a different route than Aeneas⁴⁶, while Gilius himself is compared to «Hector li ardi qui devant Toie per son cors seulement trespeeoit les gregnors batailes» (*Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 14.30) during his fight against the pagan army that was besieging Padua. Nevertheless, the transmigration from the mainland to the Venetian lagoon could have a higher symbolism and mirror the biblical Exodus: the escape from the oppression of the Pharaoh that took Jews to Israel corresponds to the escape of Christians from Attila to Dorsoduro, Rialto, and the Venetian islands. In both episodes, the moment of salvation is crossing the water, a symbol of purification and re-birth, while looking for new lands to inhabit. This description represents the other promise that God made to Abraham: The Land, 'la Terra', which is the word commonly used by Venetian writers in the Middle Ages as an antonomastic to identify the city of Venice⁴⁷.

The anthroponym Sarah allows even more parallels with the biblical story. According to tradition, Venice was founded on March 25, the date of the

to the sand on the seashore: «Benedicam tibi et multiplicabo semen tuum sicut stellas caeli et velut arenam, quae est in litore maris» (*Gn*: 22.17).

⁴⁵ *Estoire d'Atile en prose* 9.27-34 and 13.40-64 describes the migrations from the mainland to the islands of the Venetian lagoon: the first passage narrates the migration of Queen Sarah, the second that of the people of Padua who eventually joined the queen. See also Pesce 2017: 286-291.

⁴⁶ Respectively *Estoire d'Atile en prose*: 7.7-9, 9.42-43, 12.3-4, 13.7-10, 16.1-2. On Trojan myth of Venice's foundation see Ortalli 2021, 41-56; for its presence in Venetian chronicles Marin 2017: 275-282 and 401-426

⁴⁷ See, for example, how the word 'Terra' as an epithet for Venice appears several times in a work from the 14th century like *Cronica di Venexia*: 16, 18, 23 *et passim*). In Marino Sanudo the Younger's works, 'Terra' is commonly used as a synonym for Venice (see, for example, Marin Sanudo il giovane, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetie*: 23, 24, 25 *et passim*).

Annunciation and Incarnation and the beginning of salvation for Christians⁴⁸. March 25 is also the day on which the Roman Church celebrates Saint Isaac, the son of Sarah and Abraham. As the biblical Sarah is referenced by God as ‘mother of nations’ and gives birth to the divine promise of a progeny, Israel, the Franco-Italian Sarah metaphorically gives birth to a city, Venice, the fruit of divine conception as evidenced by the date of foundation, March 25, the day of the Annunciation. While this date appears for the first time only in a later 14th-century chronicle composed by the Paduan Jacopo Dondi⁴⁹, the account probably has an older Venetian tradition that likely goes back to the 11th-12th centuries⁵⁰. The importance of the date of March 25 is doubled by the connection of the birth of Venice to both the Old and New Testament, reflecting the myth of the double foundation of the city, from Troy to the *Venetia* (Antenor) and from the *Venetia* to the *Venetia maritima*.

The name of the Queen of Padua, changed from the uncommon biblical ‘Sare’ (Z) to the popular Roman ‘Adriane’ (β, on which depends V and both translations into Latin and vernacular) has, in my opinion, a strong allegorical meaning. Queen Sarah offers a solution to the historiographical problem of the origin of Venice: while most cities in the Italian peninsula could boast a Roman, Trojan, or Greek origin, Venice had to find a different myth to narrate its birth. Henceforth, the creation of the double foundation was widely accepted in Venetian medieval historiography. Nevertheless, the author of the *Estoire d’Atile en prose* seems to have made a further and bold step: connecting Venice’s origin to the Story of Stories, the Bible, through the name Sarah. Through this account, the primary role of Padua compared to Venice in the region and the dependency of Venice on Padua is mitigated. Padua is then the barren mother that needs God’s

⁴⁸ See Pesce 2017: 290-291.

⁴⁹ See Cessi 1942: 1-2.

⁵⁰ Niero 1965: 79-80: «La tradizione peranco può risalire al secolo XII, o tutt’al più al XI, quando s’inizia la datazione dei documenti [...]. D’altronde la notizia della celebrazione di Messa solenne in S. Marco nella festa dell’Annunciazione, da parte di Papa Alessandro III nel 1177, su richiesta del Doge e della Signoria, può insinuare che sin d’allora si desse peculiare significato alla celebrazione come Dies natalis di Venezia: d’altra parte il rilievo sulla facciata della Basilica di S. Marco, dei sec. XII-XIII, che rappresenta la scena, convalida la coscienza del patrocinio dell’Annunciata in questo tempo [...]. L’Annunciata come patrona della città appare nell’iconografia ufficiale, nei rilievi della facciata di S. Marco, come si è detto del sec. XII». The year 421 appears for the first time in the *Annales Veneti*: 6 (12th century). Discussing the problems raised by the historiographical acceptance of the Paduan origin of Venice in a time of strong tension between the two cities, Marin 2017: 480 affirms that Pietro Giustinian’s *Cronica Veneciarum, forma brevis* (14th century), composed a few years after Dondi wrote his historical work, designates March as the month of Venice’s foundation, however without mentioning a specific day. Finally, Ortalli 2021: 61 comments how Dondi had «malevoli sottintesi politici» and how his story could «<mettere> potenzialmente in crisi [...] le fondamenta stesse della pretesa libertà originaria di Venezia».

intervention to generate new life. This is, I believe, the purpose of a text that had ample diffusion in the Middle Ages but was early deprived of the breakthrough strength of its symbolism: to celebrate the origin of Venice as a free and independent city blessed by God.

3. Conclusions

The *Estoire d'Atile en prose* is an original text in Franco-Italian composed in the Veneto region probably in the second half of the 13th century. The anonymous author combines different sources – oral, written, or a mix of both – into a narrative that can be divided into three parts not always perfectly amalgamated. Whether these sources depend on local traditions and folklore or have an older genesis is still not perfectly clear, because the two manuscripts *V* and *Z* pass down slightly different versions of the text: *V* shows clear signs of spurious variants to celebrate the city of Padua; *Z* often offers better readings that, however, give room to problematic passages, like the genealogies of King Gilius and Queen Sarah.

Behind the war between Attila the Hun and Gilius of Padua there are both the apprehensions and fears of the regional public sentiment against Islam (and the Hungarian aim of expanding their territories in Croatia), and the celebration of the origin of Venice. This is probably the deeper meaning of the *Estoire d'Atile en prose*. Venice was neither able to make the claim for its origins directly from Classical mythology nor from Roman noble history, unlike almost all cities of the Italian peninsula, including Padua. An exact date for the foundation of the city does not exist, because Venice is the result of different migratory flows and urban development. The *Estoire d'Atile en prose* creates its own origin story for the city and mirrors the foundation of the *Venetia maritima* to the events of the Old Testament through the name Sarah, projecting the origin of the city to a higher, allegorical level.

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Paris BnF lat. 4939	Bibliothèque nationale de France	lat. 4939
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